

JONAH

Jonah rebels against his mission

1 The word of Yahweh was addressed to Jonah son of Amittai: •‘Up!’ he said ¹
‘Go to Nineveh, the great city, and inform them that their wickedness has ²
^{4:2} become known to me.’ •Jonah decided to run away from Yahweh, and to go to ³
Tarshish.^a He went down to Joppa and found a ship bound for Tarshish; he
^{Ps 107:23-30} paid his fare and went aboard, to go with them to Tarshish, to get away from ⁴
Yahweh. •But Yahweh unleashed a violent wind on the sea, and there was such ⁵
a great storm at sea that the ship threatened to break up. •The sailors took ⁵
^{Ac 27:18} fright, and each of them called on his own god,^b and to lighten the ship they
threw the cargo overboard. Jonah, however, had gone below and lain down in
^{Mt 8:24-25p} the hold and fallen fast asleep. •The boatswain came upon him and said, ‘What ⁶
do you mean by sleeping? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps he will spare us
a thought, and not leave us to die.’ •Then they said to each other, ‘Come on, ⁷
let us draw lots to find out who is responsible for bringing this evil on us’.^c
So they cast lots, and the lot fell to Jonah. •Then they said to him, ‘Tell us,^d ⁸
what is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? What
^{Ac 27:23} is your nationality?’ •He replied, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I worship Yahweh, the ⁹
God of heaven, who made the sea and the land’. •The sailors were seized with ¹⁰
terror at this and said, ‘What have you done?’ They knew that he was trying to
escape from Yahweh, because he had told them so. •They then said, ‘What are ¹¹
we to do with you, to make the sea grow calm for us?’ For the sea was growing
rougher and rougher. •He replied, ‘Take me and throw me into the sea, and ¹²
then it will grow calm for you. For I can see it is my fault this violent storm has
happened to you.’ •The sailors rowed hard in an effort to reach the shore, but ¹³
^{Ps 107:28} in vain, since the sea grew still rougher for them. •They then called on Yahweh ¹⁴
^{Jr 26:15} and said, ‘O Yahweh, do not let us perish for taking this man’s life; do not hold
us guilty of innocent blood; for you, Yahweh, have acted as you have thought
right’. •And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea grew ¹⁵
calm again. •At this the men were seized with dread of Yahweh; they offered ¹⁶
a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows.^e

Jonah is saved

2 Yahweh had arranged that a great fish should be there to swallow Jonah;^a ¹
^{✓ Mt 12:40} and Jonah remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.
From the belly of the fish he prayed to Yahweh, his God; he said:^b ²

^{Ps 120:1;} ‘Out of my distress I cried to Yahweh ³
^{130:1} and he answered me;

^{Ps 116:3} from the belly of Sheol I cried.
^{Lm 3:55} and you have heard my voice.
You cast me into the abyss, into the heart of the sea, ⁴

and the flood surrounded me.
All your waves, your billows,
washed over me. ||Ps 42:7
And I said: I am cast out Ps 31:22
from your sight.
How shall I ever look again Ps 5:7
on your holy Temple?
The waters surrounded me right to my throat,
the abyss was all around me. Ps 69:1
The seaweed was wrapped round my head
at the roots of the mountains.^c
I went down into the countries underneath the earth,
to the peoples of the past.^d
But you lifted my life from the pit,
Yahweh, my God. Ps 30:3; 16:10
While my soul was fainting within me,
I remembered Yahweh,
and my prayer came before you
into your holy Temple.
Those who serve worthless idols
forfeit the grace that was theirs.

'But I, with a song of praise,
will sacrifice to you.
The vow I have made, I will fulfil. Ps 22:25; 116:18
Salvation comes from Yahweh.'^e ||Ps 3:8

Yahweh spoke to the fish, which then vomited Jonah on to the shore.

The conversion of Nineveh and God's pardon

3 The word of Yahweh was addressed a second time to Jonah: •'Up!' he said
3 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to them as I told you to.' •Jonah
set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of Yahweh. Now Nineveh
4 was a city great beyond compare:^a it took three days to cross it. •Jonah went
on into the city, making a day's journey. He preached in these words, 'Only
5 forty days more^b and Nineveh is going to be destroyed'. •And the people of
Nineveh believed in God;^c they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the
6 greatest to the least. •The news reached the king of Nineveh, who rose from his
7 throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes.^d •A procla- Ezk 26:16
Ezk 27:30-31

1 a. For the Hebrews, 'Tarshish', cf. 1 K 10:1+; Ps 48:7+, represented the end of the world: Jonah goes as far as he can to escape his duty.
b. The sailors are from different countries: each has his own god but believes in the power of other gods as well.
c. The belief that a ship is endangered by having a guilty man on board is found elsewhere among the Ancients.
d. Hebr. inserts 'who is responsible for bringing this evil on us', a gloss from v. 7; Greek omits.
e. The author emphasises the piety of the pagan sailors: they are scandalised that Jonah should disobey Yahweh, v. 10, fear to offend Yahweh by sacrificing Jonah, v. 14, and offer worship to Jonah's God whose power they recognise.
2 a. On this fish and the other prodigies, of which the author is fond, see Introduction to the Prophets.
b. This song is a mosaic of Psalm-texts and is constructed on the conventional pattern of thanksgiving psalms: description of sufferings undergone, account of deliverance from them. For the psalmists, grave danger is a 'death' and deliverance a 'resurrection'; cf. here vv. 6,7,8. The sea, God's primordial 'enemy', cf. Jb 7:12+, is seen either as the kingdom of death itself or at least as the way that leads to it. Hence the dramatic expressions of this song which enable Jesus, Mt 12:40; Lk 11:30, to use the episode of Jonah as a figure of his own three-days' stay 'in the heart of the earth' (Sheol rather than the tomb, cf. Jon 2:2-3); the kingdom of death is depicted as a greedy monster that cannot hold Christ but must let him go (the resurrection). The analogy between Christian baptism and the resurrection of Christ has led to the use of the figure of Jonah in baptismal typology.
c. Probably the sea bed: this was thought to be the foundation on which the earth rested.
d. Text obscure. Others translate 'I went down to a land whose bars closed on me for ever'.
3 a. Lit. 'great before God', the strongest form of the superlative in Hebr.; there is a similar hyperbole in the 'it took three days to cross it', to evoke the fabulous size of Nineveh.
b. The 'forty days' suggest the 40 days of the Flood or the 40 years of Israel in the desert; cf. also 1 K 19:8. The Greek has 'Only three days more', cf. 2:1.
c. The same contrast is drawn in the gospels between the conversion of the Ninevites and the incredulity of the Jews.
d. This whole description of repentance and conversion is the antithesis of Jr 36, cf. Introduction to the

mation was then promulgated throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his ministers, as follows: 'Men and beasts, herds and flocks, are to taste nothing; they must not eat, they must not drink water. •All^e are to put on sackcloth and call on God with all their might; and let everyone renounce his evil behaviour and the wicked things he has done. •Who knows if God will not change his mind and relent, if he will not renounce his burning wrath, so that we do not perish?' •God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behaviour. And God relented: he did not inflict on them the disaster which he had threatened.

The grievance of the prophet and God's answer

4 Jonah was very indignant at this; he fell into a rage. •He prayed to Yahweh and said, 'Ah! Yahweh, is not this just as I said would happen when I was still at home? That was why I went and fled to Tarshish: I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, relenting from evil. •So now Yahweh, please take away my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living.' •Yahweh replied, 'Are you right to be angry?' •Jonah then went out of the city and sat down to the east of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. Then Yahweh God arranged that a castor-oil plant should grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and soothe his ill-humour; Jonah was delighted with the castor-oil plant. •But at dawn the next day, God arranged that a worm should attack the castor-oil plant—and it withered. •Next, when the sun rose, God arranged that there should be a scorching east wind; the sun beat down so hard on Jonah's head that he was overcome and begged for death, saying, 'I might as well be dead as go on living'. •God said to Jonah, 'Are you right to be angry about the castor-oil plant?' He replied, 'I have every right to be angry, to the point of death'. •Yahweh replied, 'You are only upset about a castor-oil plant which cost you no labour, which you did not make grow, which sprouted in a night and has perished in a night. •And am I not to feel sorry for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?'^a

Prophets; it is furthermore full of phrases characteristic of Jeremiah.

e. Hebr. adds 'and beasts'.

4 a. This final chapter ends with the note of God's mercy on all his creatures. He has mercy on Jonah in the sea, 2:7, on repentant Nineveh, on the prophet in

his self-pity; and now, 4:10-11, he explains with gentle irony how he is thoughtful even for the brute creation, still more for men and little children, 'who cannot tell their right hand from their left'. The whole book thus prepares the way for the revelation of the gospel: God is love; cf. Introduction to the Prophets.